

# **The Second Favorite Son**

by Daniel Myers

# Part One

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# 1. Jefferson Davis Packard

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JD Packard considered it entirely possible that he was the highest paid virgin in the country. Not that that was what he was being paid for, it was just an observation he made on the day of his father's funeral. What he was being paid for remained to be seen, like everything else about his new position as heir to the Packard-Peebles Empire, but, as best he could tell, all he got paid for was to remember that he was a Packard. He didn't ask to be heir, he didn't plan on it, and he certainly didn't want the job.

He grew up to take his place as the insignificant younger brother to the princely Straughan Packard IV, and to be, more or less, ignored in the lineage, as was the tradition with second sons in all the best families. JD, like his uncle Marlin, who was the younger brother to Straughan III, would be given an important-sounding position in the corporation and expected to act as a yes-man to Junior for the rest of his life. The family wouldn't mind if he wished to marry and procreate just so long as he didn't reproduce too often and didn't produce any males that might challenge the throne. Girls were good because they provided possible future mates for close-but-not-too-close cousins—keeps it all in the family that way, good blood.

Straughan IV—'Junior' to his family and a brave few others—had everything an heir to the throne was supposed to have: dashing good looks, intelligence, wit, charm, grace and a truly heroic nature, despite the fact that the age of chivalry was probably on the wane. Throughout the family history, these qualities were doled out sparingly and Junior got his generation's entire allotment. JD had neither the height nor the athletic physique of his brother. The most he inherited from good breeding was just slightly too much of the family's prominent nose.

The one quality his brother did not have was immortality. And whispers in the halls suggested that the disappearance of Junior was what sent the old man to an early grave.

JD sat behind his father's enormous mahogany desk—*his desk*, he reminded himself—and caressed its smooth, polished finish while he scrutinized the view across Columbia. When he was a kid he figured he could see halfway across South Carolina from this window in his father's penthouse office in the Packard-Peebles Building—*his office, his building*. Now he could hardly see a few miles through the thick gray

haze that hung over the city like a curtain waiting to be drawn back. The glass and concrete buildings shimmered in the hot stagnant air. This kind of heat in early June meant a long, hot summer.

JD tried to picture his father, shattered over the loss of his son, sitting at this very desk, putting a hand to his chest, and keeling forward as his heart broke. But it was not likely. His father was not overly emotional. Some might have described him as a heartless man—a few business rivals might have suggested that ice water ran through his veins. JD wouldn't have gone that far, but whatever flowed in there had to make its way through massive amounts of cholesterol deposits. He might have been brokenhearted, but being sixty pounds overweight and sucking a dozen cigars a day probably helped bring on his killer heart attack. His grief over Junior would have been real, but would have deepened considerably at the realization that the heir to the Packard-Peebles Empire was now his second son, the untamed and uncivilized Jefferson Davis Packard.

*And God knows where he could be*, JD imagined his daddy saying—he, too would have been looking out this window and wondering in which direction to look. And where would Jefferson be? Running around with them New Age homos in the west, reading poetry in the commie coffee houses of the north, or chewing on peyote with the Indians down in Mexico?

A disrespectful smile crept across JD's face and faded as he recalled the last time he returned home and had to face the old man in this leather-upholstered, bourbon-soaked office a year earlier. The old man was puffing on a fat cigar and blowing the smoke at JD just to irritate him. What JD could never tell his father was that it was one of the paradoxes of his own life—considering his stance on tobacco—but the thick, rich aroma of his father's Cubans was one of those things he missed the most.

"I want you to tell me straight, boy," the old man said, his rising tension caused his sagging jowls to ripple ever so slightly. "Are you one of them *homosexuals*?" He pronounced it as if it were a French word invading the English language.

"Come on, Pop, would it matter if I was?" JD asked. "Would you love me less?"

“I wouldn’t love you at all!” he boomed, leaning forward and jabbing the cigar at him. “You wouldn’t be a son of mine!”

“Well, since I don’t want to be cut from the will, then I’m not.”

Junior was sitting in one of the leather armchairs against the wall under the portrait of Straughan I, enjoying every minute of the conversation between his father and his younger brother. “Don’t worry about Jeffy, Daddy,” Junior offered without suppressing a wicked grin. “He likes girls, he just don’t like white girls.”

JD shot an angry glance at his brother. He knew Junior would say no more than that, but it was a poke aimed as much at him as at the old man.

“Is that true?” his father asked, glaring across at JD. “Is that what you’ve been getting up to?”

JD sunk in his chair. “Listen, Pop—”

“Stop calling me ‘Pop’! How many times have I told you not to call me that? I’m not a goddamned cola. Why don’t you try a little respect for once?” The color was rising in the old man’s face, the jowls quivered more noticeably, his forehead flushed red. When the color rose to the top of his large bald head, JD knew he was in real trouble.

*Mount Packard’s about to erupt*, JD thought as he traded a guilty grin with Junior. “Yes sir, Daddy,” he said as seriously as he could.

The lava dome receded as the old man exhaled loudly, then leaned back, took a long drag on his cigar and blew another cloud across the vast desk. “Boy,” he said in the slow, deep tone that always preceded his ‘final-word-in-this-conversation’ decision. “I suppose it’s my fault for letting you grow up running wild with the niggers.”

“Don’t call them—”

“Don’t tell me how to talk!” the old man’s voice thundered. “And don’t interrupt me again.”

“Yes, Pop ... Daddy ... Sir.”

“Now, as I was saying, you’re twenty-four now, for Christ’s sake. By the time your brother was your age he had learned most of this business from the ground right up to the top. By the time I was your age I was running it. Hell, I was running it when I was twelve.”

JD had never believed that particular exaggeration, but he let the old man continue without challenging him.

“But you—” he stroked the loose skin of his neck, thoughtfully. “You—I just don’t know what to do with you. I send you off to law school, but you say you want to take a break after barely two years. I said, ‘Fine, let the boy sow a few wild oats.’ I figured you’d spend a month having a little fun in the Caribbean, maybe raise a little hell in Paris with them French bastards. But what do I get? The only news we hear from you for the next year is when my chief accountant walks in here every month with a stack of bills that could put the company in the red for the first time since the Depression.” The old man slid a small stack of papers in front of him, picked up the top sheet and inspected it. “What the hell were you doing in Kathmandu?”

“I was visiting my friend Andy Thurmond.”

“Who?”

“Just a friend from college.”

“Pre-med, communist,” Junior interjected from his seat against the wall.

“He’s not a communist.” JD shot a silent threat at his brother. “At least, not any more.”

“Um-hmm.” The old man ignored his sons as he picked up his pace flipping through the statements. “Delhi, Bangkok, ...” he paused and glanced up at JD, “Jakarta? Where the hell is that?” But did not wait for an answer and went on to the next. “Aha, here’s one I found interesting—how did you manage to spend so much money in Alice Springs? Did you buy the town?”

“No, sir, they were having a fundraiser to build a new schoolhouse for the Aborigine kids and I thought it would be nice to make a contribution. You know, on behalf of the family. I didn’t think you’d be opposed to helping someone out once in a while.”

“I prefer to have a say in who I help out—after all, there’s a whole world in need out there and we can’t help them all.”

“We can try.”

The old man ignored the remark and thumbed through the remaining papers without comment, making only the occasional grunt.

JD smiled at the memory of Alice Springs. He almost corrected his father that only some of the money he withdrew from the bank there was a contribution to the schoolhouse fundraiser. Most of it went to purchasing a motorcycle as part of his poorly judged attempt at riding it across the Australian outback. He ended up selling

the bike—for a third of what he had paid for it—to a young Aborigine fellow with a wide smile of radiant white teeth against the blackest skin JD had ever seen. The man had howled with delight at JD’s idea of adventure, but his laugh was so infectious and so free of cynicism that, by the time he left him standing in front of the train station and roared off into a cloud of dust, he even had JD chuckling at his own folly.

“So you see that as your new self-appointed role then, do you? Traveling the world and spending my money building nigger schools?” His daddy’s words invaded like a sudden dust devil and JD’s memory vanished in the swirl. The old man dropped the stack of papers to the side and leveled his glare at JD.

JD looked down at his shoes. “It’s probably tax deductible.”

“I’m thinking about making you tax deductible, boy. You’re losing me more money than the boll weevil—you’re a goddamned profligate,” he said, tapping the stack of papers. “Were you surprised when we cut off your credit?”

“Not really.”

“Of course not. You still took your own sweet time getting your ass back home.”

“I had to work on a cargo ship to get back.”

“Good. And now that work is not an entirely foreign concept to you, I have a surprise. Your big adventure is over.” He blew another cloud of smoke. “I’m going to put you back to work and get you back on track to fulfilling your station in life.”

“You’re putting me in the field?”

“Hell no, boy—can’t afford to have you out there stirring up the masses with your communist fervor. No sir, I’ve got something special in mind for you—something right up your alley.”

“What?” JD asked, only slightly hopeful that his father was not being sarcastic.

The old man smiled. “Starting Monday morning you’re going to work in the accounting department.”

*Touché.*

“That’s eight-thirty sharp. Don’t be late—your Uncle Marlin will show you where to start.”

JD opened his mouth to protest. Realizing the futility in arguing, he closed it again.

“And that means a shave, a haircut and a tie, too.”

“Yes, sir,” JD said in defeat. “May I leave now, sir?”

“Jefferson,” the old man said, thrusting his cigar through the cloud of smoke. “You just remember, you’re a Packard.”

“Yes, sir. I remember.”

*Just remember, you’re a Packard. A Packard.* It echoed in his head. Through the plush-carpeted halls, off the wood-paneled walls of the boardrooms, the executive washrooms, the employee lunch room, across Columbia, over the fields of cotton, wheat, soy and corn to Terragravida, the family plantation outside Camden, some forty miles into the haze. ‘Remember, you’re a Packard’ echoed through the years and across time like ‘remember the Alamo’ as a rallying cry. The family credo. Remember, you’re a Packard.

“How could I forget?” JD said aloud to no one, twisting the only piece of jewelry he ever wore, a gold ring on his right hand. He could smell his father’s ghost in the stale cigar smoke permeating the fabric of the office as he sat staring out the window toward Camden.

At Terragravida his mother was probably busy making sure everyone who had come to pay their respects was being properly looked after. She too remembered she was a Packard—though, technically, she wasn’t. Remember, you’re a Packard. When the occasion calls for interpersonal relationship skills, just remember, you’re a Packard. Don’t cry; no public displays of grief, please; laugh like a gentleman; lie like a gentleman; and don’t cheat on your wife, except like a gentleman. Don’t treat women, Negroes, or the illiterate too poorly, but don’t treat them too well either, because you’re a Packard. For a Packard woman, being a Packard only meant standing dutifully to the side. The rules seemed simple enough, but were in fact quite complicated and at least a little outdated, which is why there was a need for the constant reminder, lest we forget—remember the Alamo, remember the alimony, and always, always remember you’re a Packard.

He had lasted barely a month in the suffocating confines of the accounting department before he decided another long holiday was needed. Leaving quietly was one thing JD could do well—he was practiced—and though his father might actually disown him as he often threatened to do, it was a risk he was willing to take.

He drove north first, to Chicago, with the single purpose of confronting an old friend and resolving something once and for all, and to say aloud, ‘the hell with what the Packards may think.’

During those couple of years at law school, he managed to put her out of his mind for the most part since it took virtually all his time and mental energy to keep up with studying. But despite his overwhelming workload, despite the lingering sting of her rejection, when his interest in the law began to ebb, she crept into his thoughts more and more; first her face, then her smell, then her touch. He tried getting her out of his mind by running as far away as possible, but no matter how far he ran. But they had been too close for too long for him to be able to outrun the memories, which only grew stronger in her absence. Those weeks in accounting gave him the time to think of her, of his family, and how he wished he had stood up to them years ago. She had been the only woman with whom he had ever been in love—and the years that passed only convinced him more. He did his best to be interested in his job, but his mind wandered further from his desk each day and he soon realized that if he did not do something about it immediately, that desk would be his fate.

She was in Chicago now, at the university, working on a Ph.D. in education and doing well. He knew that only from secondhand news—they had not been in contact since she left years earlier.

During the drive north, he had enough time to convince himself that if his love was so strong, hers must be the same. *It's fate*, he reminded himself. He was convinced of it.

She wasn't home when he arrived, so he waited in his car across the street from her building for almost two hours before he spotted her walking down the sidewalk. She was leaning on the arm of a tall, athletic-looking man. They were both laughing.

*Fate. JD slid down behind the steering wheel. Wrong again, asshole.*

He hadn't figured on her having more of a life than he had and just assumed she could love no other for the simple reason that *he* could love no other.

She looked happy, as lovely as she had always been, and doing well for herself—he could tell by the way she dressed, walked, laughed. They turned at her building without pause and climbed the front stairs. As with young couples in love, they seemed oblivious to everything outside a three-foot radius of their universe. While she fumbled with her keys, the man leaned over and nuzzled her neck, which made her laugh some more. JD didn't even know she was ticklish—obviously, this guy was going to know a lot more, if he didn't already.

The happy couple disappeared into the building and JD remained slumped behind the steering wheel for ten minutes, staring at her front door. He had not considered alternative plans for his fate, but he knew it wasn't in Chicago. And it wasn't south.

When he got to the interstate, he turned north without hesitation. When he got to Canada, he turned west to the ocean.

Over the next year, JD had almost forgotten he was a Packard. By that time he had drifted down to California, having given up on his efforts at being a lumberjack, a fisherman and a poet. In San Francisco he landed a new job in a bookstore and then called his old friend Dex from a payphone.

Occasionally, he would call his mother when he was fairly certain his father wouldn't be around, but, whether she said so or not, she wanted him home so much it always left him feeling heavy with guilt. It was easier to talk to Dex to catch up on the news from home; and Dex could be trusted not to mention anything to anybody about his whereabouts.

"Jeffy, where the hell you been?" Dex asked in an uncharacteristically demanding tone. "We been looking for you for a month."

"*You* couldn't find me? Hell, Dex, you always said you could find anything," JD said, but the heavy silence on the other end made his chest tighten. A chill ran up his neck to his scalp. "What's happened?"

"Jeffy—" Dex's voice became calm, somber. "I'm afraid I got some bad news for you—it's your brother."

JD listened in stunned silence as Dex delivered the news. He was sympathetic, but straightforward and blunt: Junior was dead. Apparently he had fallen overboard and drowned while on a cruise along the Alaskan coast. When Dex finished, he offered his condolences and remained silent while JD tried to digest the news.

"Thanks, Dex," JD said in a barely audible voice. He tried to say good-bye, but couldn't as the numbness washed over him. He returned the receiver to its cradle, closed his eyes and braced his hand on the scarred wall of the phone booth.

*What have I done?* He thought of his mother. And his father—his family. He opened his eyes as if from a year-long dream; he was in a urine-tainted phone booth, in a strange city, in a foreign country, and a long way from home. He would have to go back, and go back for good.

By the time he returned to South Carolina he had missed seeing his old man alive and ranting by only two days. He knew about his father's death before he got home, though. Having already started back from California, fearing the inevitable confrontation, his daddy's face jumped out at him from a newspaper in an all-night diner outside of Kansas City. It was close enough to the Southern border to find *The Confederate* on sale, so he bought a copy to read with his hamburger, and his eye was caught by his daddy's photo on page two. Then the headline next to the picture: *More Tragedy for South Carolina's Packard Family.*

His hands trembled as he tried to read.

*Straughan Packard III, head of the Packard-Peebles agricultural empire, was found dead late last night in his office. Though the cause of death has not been announced officially, an unnamed source in the coroner's office said that it appears he died of a heart attack. This is the second tragedy to strike the family in two months....*

JD stopped reading and lowered the paper. His stomach tightened, his throat felt paralyzed. He unclenched his fists and dropped the crumpled newspaper on the table. The waitress, approaching his booth with his dinner in one hand and a pot of coffee in the other, said something he couldn't hear as he got up and walked toward the door.

The outside air made him shiver despite its warm mugginess. He started his car and put it in gear. Starting toward the interstate, he stopped again.

"So dark," he whispered. "Headlights, idiot." He turned the headlights on and leaned his head forward until it rested on the steering wheel, giving in to the tears that came so suddenly he didn't have time to decide if they were for his father, his brother or himself.

He had dreaded the idea of that first meeting with his father again. The guilt the old man would lay on him, the shame. He would have done anything to avoid that meeting. Having to be reminded what a good-for-nothing he was, how he would never be half the man his brother was, how—

"But not this," JD said aloud. For as long as he could remember, he opposed his father, couldn't stand what he stood for, but—*not this*. Despite their differences, despite everything, he was his father and he *had* to love him. He had always expected there would be time for things to change. His father would see JD as an adult, accept

him as he was, stop calling him ‘boy,’ grow to respect his opinion, and, maybe, someday even learn to be proud of him.

There was no chance of that now. Suddenly, he wanted everything to be different—a chance to prove himself, to make his father proud, to be proud of who he was—but without any way to prepare for it, there was no more time and no more chance to undo the past. He drove straight through the night and didn’t stop for anything more than a tank of gas and another cup of coffee.

He crossed the Confederate border at Tennessee. The border agent glanced at JD’s passport. Then his expression softened from bored officiousness to an embarrassed sympathy, and he handed it back.

“You’re one of those Packards, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes,” JD said. “I’m one of them.”

“Welcome home, sir.”

JD arrived home late the night before the funeral. He didn’t intend on waking his mother, but as he was making a sandwich in the kitchen to take to his room, she came down to meet him. She looked much older than he expected. The cheeks of her strong angular face, once full, were now sinking. Her blue eyes, once ablaze with passion and pride, looked tired, empty and scared.

“Hello, Mama,” JD said barely above a whisper.

Before she said a word, she walked across the kitchen and hugged him silently.

“Hello, Jefferson,” she said, her voice was hoarse. “Welcome home, son. Let me look at you,” she pushed him back to arm’s length and brushed the unruly hair back from his face. “Lord, look at you, skin and bones. I declare, Jefferson, I just don’t know how the good Lord manages to keep you alive without your mama to take care of you.”

“Mama—” JD wanted to tell her how sorry he was.

“Hush, now,” his mother said and hugged him again. “You’re home now, Jefferson. That’s all that’s important. You’re home now.”

At the funeral service JD sat in the front pew—his mother on his right side, his sister Mineola and her husband to his left. In the second pew were Uncle Marlin, Aunt

Daisy, their daughters, and sons-in-law. The rest of the pews were filled to capacity: uncles and aunts and cousins growing ever more distant; employees, colleagues, and community leaders hoping to be seen; business rivals coming to pay their respects to an honored adversary and to make absolutely certain he was dead. The faces were austere, but there were no muffled sobs or visible tears. All were conducting themselves with appropriate decorum.

JD looked at his sister next to him. She showed no signs of tears.

Minnie sat rigidly still, straight of spine, hard of jaw. In her youth, she could have been an attractive woman, but was, instead, considered a *handsome* woman. The drawback was that, now in her mid-thirties, ‘handsome’ had become ‘sober’ and ‘sober’ was in jeopardy of becoming ‘grim’ before too many more years passed. Like their mother, Minnie was a woman of strong, lean features and a straight, sharp nose. Unlike their mother, Minnie was tempered into hardness by a cloud of bitterness that had engulfed her since she was old enough to realize that women did not matter in this family, that the best she would be asked for was to marry correctly.

She was a full eleven years older than JD, so he had never known her to be a child. She was always far too serious—he had never heard her laugh with a child’s lack of restraint or unbounded glee. She might chuckle a little or titter at the governor’s bad jokes, but that was practiced only for state occasions. Her hands were folded tightly in her lap, leaving open no invitation for anyone to take her hand in theirs and offer comfort in her hour of need.

*No, she doesn’t need anyone. JD thought, Grief? No, not that either. It was her hour of ‘duty.’*

JD had briefly considered reaching over to take his sister’s hand in his, but dismissed the idea. Instead, he took his mother’s warm hand. She was holding up well, no trembling lips, her eyes clear. She took her son’s hand in both of hers and offered him a brief smile.

The gesture did not go unnoticed by Minnie, who barely turned her head as her eyes glanced down at JD’s hand in her mother’s grasp. Minnie unfolded her hands and held her left out for her husband, Tilly.

Tilman Todd was not paying attention to his wife’s offer of her hand. His thoughts were more than likely calculating the odds for the upcoming Columbia-Tampa game. He was there out of duty, too, but unlike his wife, would only put in the minimal attendance required before he disappeared to satisfy his lust for football and

practice his remarkable talent for losing money on it. The sudden presence of his wife's pointed elbow in his ribs caught his attention.

Tilly looked across at Minnie's glare, then down to the hand she offered, and, after several moments' hesitation, took her hand in his.

At the pulpit, one of the most powerful men in the Packard-Peebles Corporation, Luther LaSalle, was into the fifteenth minute of his eulogy. He had been his father's principal advisor and executive vice-president. Luther's father had worked for JD's grandfather. From the beginning, his future was as planned out as it was for a Packard boy. After law school he took a staff position in the legal department for grooming until he would inherit his own father's role in the same tradition. In Luther's entire legal career, which must be more than thirty years by now, he had never once handled or argued a case that did not involve Packard-Peebles Incorporated.

"A man of vision," Luther was saying in his *it's-mah-turn-to-talk-to-that-damn-jury-and-nobody-and-Ah-mean-nobody's-gonna-tell-me-when-to-shut-up* voice. "A man who escorted this company through the twentieth century and pointed it down the road toward the twenty-first. A man whose genius as a corporate leader was matched only by his loyalty as a friend."

JD's gaze rose to the dust particles illuminated in a beam of sunlight bleeding in from the skylight. The dust hung suspended, twirling slowly and weaving toward the ceiling of the old church like the soul of a snake nonchalantly sliding its way to heaven.

After the funeral service there was a gathering at Terragravida for the many guests who enjoyed funerals too much to know when to leave. JD was tired of the arm-squeezing and concerned looks being offered by those of practiced sincerity. Not to mention the occasional accusatory glance offered the prodigal son. He sought refuge in the one place he figured would be empty of family and friends that day, the Packard-Peebles building.

*Just a couple of hours of peace*, he promised himself as he leaned against the plate-glass view of Columbia, safe and secure in his twelfth floor air-conditioned womb, staring into the shroud of haze. Then he, too, would have to go do his duty.

*The office, his office* <sup>¾</sup>*that's going to take some getting used to*, he thought as he inspected the place. Everything about it reminded him of his father. From the

expansive view of the city to the mahogany walls and matching desk, the burgundy carpet and the leather upholstered armchairs. To one side there was a fireplace—an unlikely addition to an office building, but his father had been particular about the place having the right ‘plantation’ look. To the other, a door that led to the private bath and ‘rest’ facilities— so the boss could fall asleep on the job and no one would know.

If the office itself was not enough of a reminder, on the wall opposite the desk was his daddy’s portrait scowling down at him. All the walls were lined with the paintings of numerous ancestors; ‘The ten most wanted,’ he used to call them. Straughan Packard I, a man who gained a heroic reputation at Gettysburg during the War of Southern Independence and the one generally accredited with transforming the one plantation into a multimillion-dollar corporate empire. Straughan II, grandson of the first Straughan and JD’s grandfather, was a worried looking man, but it was not the concerns or responsibilities of an empire that lined his face.

*No, JD thought as he examined the portrait of his distressed grandfather, what weighed on this man was something else. Perhaps he, too, had trouble remembering he was a Packard.*

The honored place for the currently reigning Straughan was over the bar.

“The most important part of business, boy,” his daddy had told him. “More empires have been built, conquered, bought, and sold over a bourbon on the rocks than with the point of a sword—it’s the *civilized* way, boy. Remember that.”

As of today, JD was technically the currently reigning Straughan, though it would not be expected of him to have his portrait done for another twenty years or so. That would give him enough time to reach his ‘prime,’ which was a euphemism for getting fat enough to look the part.

On the last wall were some smaller, but equally somber portraits over the fireplace. Keziah Straughan, the founding father, and another of his half brother, Bascom Peebles. His father’s unfulfilled wish was to move the portrait of Peebles out to the woodshed. He blamed any and all weaknesses in the lineage on Peebles’ blood.

The fireplace itself, for the most part ornamental, had nostalgic value to the old man, who boasted: “More incriminating evidence has been torched on those bricks than in any congressional office in Richmond *or* Washington.”

Mounted above the fireplace was the only thing JD really liked in the office—a musket that had belonged to a man named Hezekiah Josiah Myggs, so many great-grandfathers ago that JD couldn't count them. Myggs did not count for much in the lineup, so there was no portrait. Born a poor yeoman farmer like his parents before him, he would have died the same had it not been for the destiny of his child.

JD stood by the fireplace and ran his finger down the rough surface of the musket's long barrel. It was not the most finely crafted musket of its day, but well made, a workingman's musket built to be used daily and built to last. It probably still worked. And, now that he was the boss, maybe they'd even let him give it a try. He took it down from its perch and sighted down the long barrel at an imaginary redcoat on the roof of the building across the street. Then raised his aim to a piece of land some forty miles distant, just past where the rivers fork. Where it bends and widens and the fertile earth rises from the swamp. Where his ancestors had come more than two hundred years earlier because they heard a man could grow just about anything he chose to stick in the ground there: corn, peas, potatoes, indigo, even rice if his land was low and close enough to the river. With hard work, luck, and the blessing of God, they were promised prosperity.

JD lowered the musket and stared into the haze. But it was also a hard, unforgiving land, ruled by a stern unyielding God. Between May and October the heat could be as harsh on a man's back as the whip of a slave driver. The ticks and mosquitoes were relentless in their pursuit for blood. Cholera, yellow fever, malaria or influenza could spread rapidly and carry off the good along with the sinful. Even childbirth too often meant a time of death. JD returned his aim to the imaginary redcoat.

Myggs carried the musket around the low country for nearly seven years during the War of American Independence. He was not a man of wealth, property or education; his own farm had been plundered so many times by the British all that remained was dirt and tree stumps. Nor was he a man of great intelligence or wit. But Hezekiah Josiah Myggs had one treasure so precious an empire would be borne of it; one treasure that escaped the successive pillaging and plundering of every British troop that stumbled across the parish.

One treasure—and her name was Eulah Mae. His daughter is where the family tree officially starts; all that went before did not matter. As legend goes, the daughter

of Hezekiah was the prettiest girl from the Congaree River to the PeeDee. It was Eulah Mae's simple charm and rapturous beauty that captured the hearts of many, but she had surrendered it to only two loves. And from them, she gave birth to an empire.

That was the official story. Some nasty innuendo survived through the years that suggested there were a few more than two loves and that the progeny were two bastards. The joke was that through progress and modernization the business now only requires one.

"You planning on shooting someone?"

JD jumped at the unexpected voice. He turned around to face the intruder. "Keep sneaking up on people like that and you're liable to be the one gets shot, Dexter."

"How you doing, Jeffy?" Dex approached JD. He was smiling—not his old relaxed, easy smile, but a subdued, tense, closed lip smile.

JD laid Myggs' musket across the desk and took his friend's hand. Dex slapped his free hand on JD's shoulder, then pulled him into a bear hug. He was a good four or five inches taller than JD and probably could have broken his spine with one arm.

Dexter Peebles was his best friend. Since as far back as either knew of their family histories, Dex's great-granddaddies were owned as slaves by JD's, or when slavery ended and they gave it a new name, there was always a granddaddy of Dex's being exploited by a granddaddy of JD's. As Dex's father put it, "Either they *owned* us or we *owed* them. It's all jes' slavery."

As a kid, JD had vowed the practice would end with their parents' generation. Dex usually responded with a good-natured laugh and announced to an imaginary audience, "That's my boy! Jefferson Davis Packard's gonna change the world."

When they were kids, JD wouldn't have believed anything could come between him and his two best friends, Dexter and Chillula Peebles, but time and geography put space between them. Dex finished high school and joined the army. After that he went to work for the company, got married, and became a responsible, hard-working man. JD went to the university and became ... well, JD. And Chillula—Lula—he hadn't seen her for a year. Not since Chicago.

Lula was Dex's little sister. The three of them grew up together—their mama, Miss Elvira, was JD's nanny for the first ten years of his life and his mother had never

objected to her raising the three together. A white child of privilege being raised alongside two black kids might have raised a few eyebrows, but his mother was not like her husband and she sometimes managed to protest the status quo in her own subtle way.

“So they’re letting you in the building now?” JD said when Dex released him from his grip.

“Hell, Jeffy, you don’t keep up with the company newsletter then? I’m working indoors now. They made me a manager and moved me into the building.” He shrugged. “Down on the second floor, of course. But you’re talking to the Assistant Manager of AgOps-Carolinas Division: cotton, corn, soy, and that silly ass idea of your daddy’s, ginkgo biloba—waste of money, that one, if you ask me.”

“Wow,” JD said quietly. He was not surprised at Dex being promoted, though historically a black man rarely moved above operational supervisor, or maybe farm manager at one of the more distant operations. To rise to head office, and to do so in just a few short years was impressive. But what really shocked JD was that his daddy had gone with the ginkgo idea—it had been JD’s idea, not his daddy’s. He spent twenty minutes one day trying to convince his father of its many beneficial properties and that it was a crop for the future—the old man just blew a cloud of smoke at him and told him to get back to the accounting department.

“Well, what do you know?” He returned his attention to Dex. “And you’re working today?”

“Nobody’s working today. I just stopped by to kiss up to the new boss.”

JD stepped over to the bar. “Right then, whatcha drinking, Mr. Assistant Manager AgOps? I suppose we ought to at least toast *your* success.”

“Not for me, thanks. The job title may sound impressive, but,” he raised his palms, “I’m afraid I still don’t get to drink up here.”

JD fished a couple of beers out of the refrigerator and held one out to Dex. “They tell me it’s *my* office now.”

“Gonna change the world, eh, Jeffy?” Dex held out his hand and took the beer. “So, how you doing?”

JD shrugged. “Okay, I guess. He was my daddy. I couldn’t stomach just about everything he held dear.” He looked around at the opulence of the office and added, “But he was my daddy.”

“Yeah,” Dex nodded sympathetically. “But it’s not about your daddy that worries me. It’s Junior.”

JD turned away and, as if the view was pulling him, walked to the large plate-glass window. “Yeah,” he said. “Any news?”

Dex took a sip of his beer and examined the label. “He was on a cruise ship off the coast of Alaska,” he said restating the facts. “They say he had a bit to drink before he left the casino that night, but the water was calm and Junior wasn’t unfamiliar with the deck of a cruise ship.”

“Or being drunk,” JD added.

“Yeah, guess he did sometimes walk straighter with a bottle in each pocket.” Dex paused. “Anyway, the cabin boy said it didn’t look like he’d been in his stateroom all night. The captain radioed it in, and within a couple of hours the US Coast Guard had started the search. They couldn’t find a trace.” He hesitated, reluctant to add what he hadn’t told JD on the phone. “They said they couldn’t rule out suicide. It got your daddy hopping mad.”

“He wouldn’t kill himself,” JD said to the window. He tapped his ring on the glass.

“No. Anyway, they finally gave up the search.”

“Gave up?” JD turned back to face Dex.

“Yeah. Only so many places they could look.” He was silent for a long time before he finally added, “Jeffy, they...uh...closed the books on it, called it an accident— ‘death by misadventure,’ they said.”

“What about you?” JD wiped a tear away with the heel of his hand. “Did they give you a chance?”

“A chance at what?”

“A chance to find him. You told me once that was your specialty, that you could find anything, anybody, anywhere; that you were a bloodhound in a man’s skin. Isn’t that what you did in the army? What was it, CIC, CIA, something like that?”

“CID,” Dex corrected. “Criminal Investigation Division. That was different. This is search and rescue—it ain’t like looking for an AWOL private or finding out who’s been stealing from the Officers Club.”

“Didn’t you tell me detective work was what you were born for? Isn’t that what you said you wanted to do instead of doing exactly what your daddy and all your granddaddies before you did?”

“Jeffy.” Dex shook his head in confusion. “Yeah, I may have said that once, but you know I exaggerate sometimes. Maybe a while back I would’ve liked to get into that line of work if the opportunities were there, but...” He shrugged.

“You mean opportunities for a black man,” JD said flatly.

“Yeah, that’s what I mean.” Dex said as if confessing, then lowered his voice. “The guys they had knew what they were doing. They did the best they could. I know it can’t be easy, Jeffy.”

“Well, we’re not giving up. Not yet.” JD turned back to the window to wipe another tear away. “And as my first executive decision, I’m putting you in charge.”

“It’s not that easy, Jeffy. You don’t understand how things work around here.”

“I understand I’m the boss—that’s all I need to know.”

“He’s gone, Jeffy.”

“Not yet he isn’t,” JD said. He was losing control of his voice, so he choked back the rest of what he wanted to say. He didn’t want Dex to see him fall apart, and his composure was weakening. It was not grief, but rising anger at the cruel twist that took both these people from him. Taken while he was trying so hard to believe he wasn’t a part of them. He twisted the ring around his finger, then paused and inspected it. At a glance, it looked like his class ring from USC, but it wasn’t. Gold, with slivers of blue sapphire in the shape of a cross that separated the engraved initials S and P—this one was a different type of class distinction. It was not his and did not represent a graduation, but a promise.

He and his brother could have been taken for exact opposites, but they needed each other like two halves of a whole person. Junior envied his little brother’s freedom and the exploits he imagined JD got up to, the living expression of the nonconformity that he dared not express himself. It was a source of amusement for him and sometimes an excuse for his cruel jealousy.

But JD needed his brother even more. With Junior around, he was, in part, relieved of the legacy he was born into. Not being the favored firstborn provided him with his freedom and, at times, his own reason to envy. On occasion, when they were both at their worst, JD thought he could truly hate his brother. But he didn’t. He needed him; they needed each other, and both knew it. They had an understanding, a covenant, and loved each other because of it.

“I’m sorry, Jeffy. Now’s not the time.” Dex stepped up behind him and patted his shoulder. “Just get through today. We can talk later, tomorrow. I’ll leave you alone for now.”

JD remained motionless at the window.

Dex set the bottle of beer on the bar as he walked to the door and stopped. “Just one other thing, Jeffy,” he paused.

“Yeah?”

Dex hesitated for a moment. “Might not be the best time to tell you this—don’t want to make things more complicated than they already are—but there’s something else you should know before it catches you by surprise.”

JD turned to him. “What is it?”

“Lula’s coming back,” Dex said. He left, closing the door behind him.

*Lula’s coming back.* JD rolled it over in his mind as he dropped into the chair behind the desk. *So what?* That she was returning home to her family meant nothing to him or in any way suggested that he had anything to do with it—unlikely she even knew that he, too, was back. But, still, he rolled the words around again—*Lula’s coming back.*

He stared at Hezekiah Myggs’ musket lying across the desk and remembered something in the story about the man’s daughter being ‘the prettiest girl from here to the PeeDee,’ but they wouldn’t have known the half of it. The girl who fit that description was still alive.

And she was coming home.

“Lula,” he whispered.

## 2. Eulah Mae Myggs

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Eulah Mae Myggs was not a bad girl, not at all. She was a friendly girl. She liked people, but she was not immoral and did not lie with every boy in the district and, in fact, had lain with very few of them.

Aside from the boys, though, she did have a weakness for men—especially men in uniform. And there were more than a few of them wandering around between the PeeDee and Congaree Rivers when she was a lass in the closing days of the War of Independence. Of course she was a patriot herself, but she learned to not personally hold any grudges against the British soldiers, despite the fact they were indirectly responsible for the death of her brother, had killed most of the Stokes boys and cruelly destroyed many of the neighboring farms. That was war.

She had not discovered her fondness for men in uniform until well into her sixteenth year because she did not have a mother to teach her about these things and so, like most everything else, she had to teach herself.

Her mother had died—bleeding to death and with such an agonizing scream that it would forever ring in Eulah Mae’s ears—while giving birth to her little brother when Eulah Mae was eight, the year before the war with England started in earnest. The little brother had also died in childbirth, so young Eulah Mae did not see what purpose it had all served. From then on it was just her, her father Hezekiah, and her brother Lucas, who was four years older, on the small farm in Teeter Mill on the Winstonsborough Line, near where Teeter Creek forked with the Wateree River.

Even at a young age, Eulah Mae could sense her father lacked a certain enthusiasm for working the hard-baked land. From the shade of the stand of red cedar at the edge of the field, where she sometimes played, she could often hear the steady stream of curses her father directed at the mule, the plow, the land or the sun. His long, droopy mustache draped over his mouth so she could not see his lips move, and she could not always understand what he was saying. But hearing his voice in the hot, still afternoon was like the hum of cicadas, it was the pulse of the land and the man who worked it.

At the end of the long day, they’d gather over their simple meal and Hezekiah would bow his head in more of a long sigh than a prayer. “Dear God, thanks for the—” he’d hesitate and raise an eye to the offering on the table as if searching for the word

“—food. Please forgive the soul of my dead Susannah and pay no mind to her spiteful tongue. Bless the dirt so that we kin have a decent harvest.” The three of them would eat in silence. Later, when Eulah Mae and her brother had crawled into their loft to sleep, Hezekiah would settle into his rocker to smoke his pipe in silence and she would fall asleep to the slow, creaky sound of that old chair swaying back and forth and the bitter smell of tobacco smoke. With Lucas breathing quietly beside her and Hezekiah downstairs, she felt safe in what, even to her young eyes, seemed a fragile existence.

Hezekiah did not take the children to the Presbyterian church in Teeter Mill on Sundays as their mother had done, so the days drifted by slowly, one tumbling over into the next without punctuation except by the seasons and Hezekiah’s occasional trip to the devil.

When her mother was alive, Eulah Mae did not pay any mind to her father’s occasional disappearances because her mother did not—but the first time it happened after her mother died, she was barely nine and it was the first time she was left completely alone on the farm.

Hezekiah was struggling behind the plow with Lucas pulling the mule and Eulah Mae walking a few steps behind looking for what Indian treasures the plow might turn up. When the plow got stuck on the remnants of a buried tree stump, it had not been the first time, but this one set Hezekiah off cursing like Eulah Mae had never heard before—cursing and kicking the plow and beating it with his hat. Lucas took a few steps back to keep out of Hezekiah’s reach.

Then he just up and left. Without saying a word to either of them, Hezekiah turned and walked away. He left the plow, the mule, Lucas, and Eulah Mae where they were and walked off toward the road, all the while cursing until his voice grew too distant to hear and the cicadas resumed their nervous chorus.

Lucas and Eulah Mae walked to the edge of the field, sat down in the shade of the red cedars and waited in silence, staring into the distance where Hezekiah had disappeared in the shimmer of heat. When it became apparent that he was not coming back any time soon, Lucas went back to the plow, unhitched the mule and led it back to the barn.

“I’ll be returning ’fore nightfall,” Lucas said after he finished tending the mule. “Just stay put.”

“Where ya goin’, Lucas?” she asked her brother.

“Reckon I’ll start at the Turnbower place.” Lucas looked down and studied his red dust-covered feet in silence for a moment. “Iffen Hezekiah’s not there, maybe he’s gone into Teeter Mill.”

“I wanna go wit’ ya.”

“Naw, you’ll only slow me down,” Lucas said as he started toward the road. “Now just hush up, don’ ack like no baby.”

Eulah Mae followed her brother as far as the road and watched him grow smaller down the rutted path until he turned the bend, and she was truly alone for the first time in her life. She returned to the porch of their weather-beaten cabin and resolved not to cry, but Lucas had been the last person she knew and now he, too, was gone, leaving her in solitude and the ever-increasing shadows. She cried briefly when she thought she was alone in the world and then again when she realized maybe she was not and would soon be devoured by whatever wicked creatures lurked in the darkness.

When the sun sank below the trees and the long dark shadows crept ever closer as if they were reaching out for her, she went inside where the emptiness was less frightening than the darkness outside. Hezekiah’s musket leaned in the same corner by the table where he always left it—she thought perhaps she should hold it in case the Indians or a wild animal came for her, but it was heavy and she could barely lift it and did not know how to load the powder like she had seen her father do when he was hunting rabbits. Besides, she knew Hezekiah had told her not to ever touch it until she was thirteen and he could teach her how to use it properly. So instead she settled on the floor under the plank table, gnawed on a cold biscuit and tried to recall the sound of her mother’s voice, but could only hear the echoes of the scream and the final low moan as life had escaped her body.

“*It was God’s will, Mr. Myggs,*” she remembered hearing old Mrs. Stokes’ hushed voice after she had emerged from the cabin with her hands stained red from blood and approached her father. Hezekiah had come out only minutes earlier and had not noticed Eulah Mae sitting in the shade near the well. “You must not question Him when He chooses to call our loved ones home,” Mrs. Stokes said in an almost pleading whisper. “You must be strong for your children that still live. You must not let your faith waver.” Hezekiah did not speak, nor did he look at Mrs. Stokes when she spoke. His face was blank of expression, his eyes affixed on the field he had that day been plowing. Mrs. Stokes turned and started back to the cabin then paused

briefly and said, without turning back to him, "*It was a boy.*" Eulah Mae remembered it was a boy that had killed her mother.

By the time Lucas returned from his search for Hezekiah, darkness had nearly swallowed the little house and fear drove Eulah Mae to embrace her brother the moment he walked through the door. He pushed her back gently without a word, then built a fire and warmed some corn pone.

"Don' you worry yourself none. He'll be back," Lucas said through a mouthful of biscuit when they had finally settled down to dinner. "He always comes back."

"Where'd he go?"

"Don' matter."

"Has he gone to the devil?"

"Yup. Now hush up and eat."

'Gone to the devil' was how her mother had explained it when Hezekiah's anger at the hard soil got the better of him and sent him off long before the day's work was done. Eulah Mae had once asked her where the devil was and, frowning, her mother said, "In Cornlicker, now hush up." Eulah Mae did not know where Cornlicker was, but did not ask.

Eulah Mae awoke in the blackness of night at the sound of her father's heavy footsteps stumbling onto the porch in the dark and his curses as he struggled to find the door latch. She raised her head and leaned forward to see over her brother's sleeping body into the weak orange glow of a candle flame, then heard the strain of the old wood rocker. She gently climbed over her brother and down the ladder to the cool, dusty floor where she stood at the edge of the candle's glow.

Hezekiah was mumbling to himself, staring, glassy-eyed into the darkness, then turned to the movement in the shadows, and squinted at Eulah Mae.

"Chile," he said in a low, scratchy voice. "Why ain't you asleepin'?"

Eulah Mae did not answer.

"Come 'ere," Hezekiah said and reached a hand out to his daughter. "Come 'ere, chile."

Eulah Mae hesitated, then took a cautious step toward her father. She folded her arms in front of her and stepped to his side.

"You growin' fast, Eulah Mae," Hezekiah said as he reached out and gently put his heavy hand on her tiny shoulder. "How old you now?"

“Nine years,” she whispered.

“Almos’ growed up.” His eyes were wet as he stroked her hair. “You liken to your mama. How’s it that the same sun turns my skin to leather and your hair to soft gold?”

She remained silent.

“Now why ain’t you asleepin’?” He asked.

“I was scared you warn’t coming back from the devil,” she said.

“You sound like your ma, too.” His head swayed, he leaned back and looked into the darkness above. “Sometimes the devil helps me forget hell.”

He looked back to Eulah Mae and leaned closer to her. His breath was foul.

“I’m sorry I ain’t a good pa to ya, Eulah Mae—cain’t help that. My pa warn’t a good pa neither, but he was a better farmer. He gave me this piece of dirt and told me that owning land was the most important thing in life, a man only matters if he own land. That we be farmers and the soil’s the blood in our veins. I want to tell you it ain’t true, but I reckon I jes’ don’ have the heart in it like I oughta. ’T was better when your ma was ’round.” He squeezed her shoulder. “I’ve sweated most my life away in yon fields and now there’s somethin’ I got to do before I spend the rest of it there, too.”

“What do you have to do, Pa?”

He looked down and was silent for a long moment.

“There’s talk of a war comin’. With England. Soon. Heard some men talkin’ ’bout it in Teeter Mill jes’ today and I reckon it makes sense. We spend our days breakin’ our backs to get a little food outta this ornery land and the Crown want we should turn ’round and pay them for the privilege. They say ol’ King George be sending troops and stirrin’ up trouble with the niggers and the Injuns. And that ain’t right. It may jes’ be dirt, but it be our dirt. Sometimes it don’ feel like its worth fightin’ the plow, but when it comes to it, I reckon its worth fightin’ for, ’cause it’s all we got.” He looked back at Eulah Mae. “So’s they’ll be needin’ me to help ’em shoot some Englishmen.”

Eulah Mae said nothing. Her eyes were warm with tears.

“I be talkin’ to Stokes. Reckon they might be open to takin’ you and the boy in fer a spell.”

“Miz Stokes scares me.”

“I know.” He nodded. “She scares me too. But she’s a good God-fearin’ woman. She can learn ya things I cain’t.”

“You comin’ back?” The first tear rolled down her cheek.

“Yup,” he said. “Might be a year, maybe two at the most, but I be comin’ back. Then you and Lucas and me, maybe we make somethin’ of this godforsaken farm.”

“What if you don’t come back?”

“I always come back.”

“But what if you don’t?” She demanded, raising her voice.

“*Shhh*, you be wakin’ your brother.” He reached up and wiped a tear off her cheek with his thumb, his calloused skin rough against hers. “Iffen I didn’t, then you’d have to be growed up about it and learn to take care of yourself. You’d have to be strong. Take what life owes ya and don’t settle for none less, ’cause otherwise someone else be takin’ your share. Maybe find yourself a husband that owns land and a few niggers. You’ll be a pretty girl. There’ll be plenty men interested in havin’ ya for a wife, so don’t go settlin’ for one who cain’t make your life better.”

“But I don’ wanna husband.”

“Ya will, someday, when you growed up.” He paused, then tenderly patted her shoulder. “Now don’ ya go worryin’ yourself over such matters, ’cause I be coming back ’fore you even notice I’m gone.” He ran his hand down her arm and took her hand in his. “Now, git on to bed, your pa’s gonna set up for a while.” He let go of her. “Go on now, git.”

Eulah Mae tried to be quiet climbing over Lucas when she returned to her bed, but she saw his eyes were open and wet with tears. He turned his back to her and did not say a word—the only sound was the slow creaking of Hezekiah’s rocker.

The fighting began in the spring of 1775 in New England, and, although the war would not reach Camden in earnest for another three years, Hezekiah wasted no time in casting aside his plow to do his part for liberty. Not everyone supported independence from England; some neighbors remained loyal to the Crown, while others remained loyal to themselves, their families, their farms. But Hezekiah was a patriot and would not wait for the war to come to him. Eulah Mae did not want him to

leave, but she was glad to see his sadness dissipate amidst his enthusiasm for shooting Englishmen.

When Hezekiah finally did depart north, Eulah Mae and Lucas went to live with the Stokes, whose farm was a couple of miles down the road toward Camden. The Stokes' place was a small but efficient farm—a modest, but clean and orderly cabin of rough-hewn timber sat in the shade of three big sweetgum trees along the road to Camden. Behind the house was a large vegetable patch showing signs of flourishing despite the already harsh heat of early summer, and a barn held a mule, a milk cow named Violet and a hog. The two oldest boys, also eager to fight the British, went off together at the same time as Hezekiah, so the house was no more crowded than before Lucas and Eulah Mae had arrived. The third brother, Theo, remained to help his father plant another crop of Indian corn.

If any of the Stokes resented the burden of caring for the Myggs children, they did not show it. The household seemed gripped in a grave silence, an overly zealous work ethic unknown in the Myggs family, and a grim acceptance of whatever trials God chose for them.

Eulah Mae's fear of Mrs. Stokes subsided within days after their arrival. The first thing Mrs. Stokes did was force her and Lucas to bathe, despite it being months before they would normally consider doing such a thing. Lucas threatened to run away, while Eulah Mae just gave in to tears under the woman's vigorous scrub brush. But after that first horrific episode, Mrs. Stokes turned out to be less frightening than she was strict about cleanliness, promising there would be another bath before winter. With her hard, dark eyes, silver hair, and a frown permanently carved in her face, she was not a person who invited argument. Nor was she was shy about expressing her mind and repeated many times that it was merely her Christian duty to take in the Myggs children and give them a decent Christian home since, as she so often phrased it, "that man Myggs is not fit for raisin' young'uns."

Being the only member of the household left who could read, every evening she spent an hour reading aloud from the Bible for the others by the dim glow of the candle. It was a duty she had shared with the two oldest boys when they were at home, but Theo was slow learning the words and Mr. Stokes had never tried. When she discovered that neither Lucas nor Eulah Mae had any learning, she accepted it as just another chore to add to the long list of duties God had set for her.

Mr. Stokes showed little concern about having Eulah Mae and her brother living with them. He was an old man with thin white hair, a pockmarked face and stooped shoulders, who seldom spoke to others but often mumbled to himself, shaking his head and grunting as he did so. Already showing signs of feeble-mindedness, he would sometimes stare squinty-eyed at Eulah Mae or Lucas as if he was trying to recall who they were, or if they were his or not.

Theo was a dull boy of eighteen, tall and thin and looking awkward even in his own home. He spoke little more than a few words in a day at the best of times, but neither did he complain that, with the departure of his brothers, his workload on the farm more than doubled.

The day the two oldest Stokes boys left to go fight the British, Mrs. Stokes stood at the deeply rutted road and watched until they had disappeared from view, then dropped to her knees on the verge and prayed with silent tears for nearly an hour.

“Everything is in the good Lord’s hands,” she explained solemnly to Eulah Mae. “And He doesn’t know what you need unless you tell Him.”

She prayed several times a day, every day, and sometimes for almost an hour at a time. When she was not cooking or cleaning or directing the children’s education with the ruthless discipline of a slave driver or digging in her vegetable garden or sewing or grunting over the churn or helping in the field if it was summer or harvest time, sweating over the foul pot of boiling fat making soap if it were spring or fall, the only two pastimes she saw worthy of filling idle hours were reading from the Bible and praying. She would pray for her boys in the war, for the crop of corn or the cabbage in her garden, for that man Myggs’ poor dead wife, for Eulah Mae and Lucas that it was not too late to save their souls. There was nothing too trivial or beyond prayer. She prayed for each one of her boys separately, starting with the oldest and working her way down. But despite her prayers, the oldest Stokes boy was killed during the first skirmish he was in. The second brother lived two months longer before he, too, was killed. Mrs. Stokes only prayed longer and more ardently for salvation.

When word reached Teeter Mill in 1778 that Major General Cornwallis in London was preparing to bring the war to the southern colonies, Theo decided the time had come for him, too, to fight. He had said nothing of his plans until after the crops had been planted, when he made a brief announcement on the day he left that he was off to join up. Lucas and Mr. Stokes could handle the winter crop, although Mrs.

Stokes pleaded with her youngest son that they could not. But Theo was resolute in his decision and gave his mother a brief kiss on the cheek, shook his father's hand with a promise that he would return to help with the harvest, then turned and started down the long road to Camden. Mrs. Stokes knelt in the dust and prayed, occasionally choking back the sobs that Eulah Mae had never heard before or since.

A few weeks later Hezekiah returned to South Carolina for the first time in more than two years to join Colonel Marion in preparation for the fight over the South. He visited only briefly before continuing on to Charleston, but Eulah Mae thought he seemed happier than she had ever seen. As they sat under the shade of the big sweetgum he told of the many glorious battles he had fought and how the British had come to regret picking a fight with a Myggs.

"The Myggs man is a warrior." He added a nod to confirm the truth. "Always has been, always will be. That's why we don't make such good farmers."

Lucas listened to his father, wide-eyed and vowed that he, too, would join the fight for independence.

"Ay, that'd get them British running." Hezekiah laughed and tousled the boy's hair. "Iffen you were old 'nough, boy, but the war won't be lasting much more'n another year."

Lucas, however, was older than his father treated him and two months later, on his seventeenth birthday, he left to join the fight for liberty and for the pride of the family. And Eulah Mae watched her brother march off down the road, then knelt beside Mrs. Stokes in silent prayer.

"May God's will be done. Amen," Eulah Mae whispered regretfully at the end of her prayer.

God's will was accomplished with a cruel efficiency four months to the day after Lucas joined. He did not die heroically, by bullet or bayonet, nor did he ever have a chance to fight or even fire his musket at anything bigger than a squirrel. He died of pneumonia, coughing his lungs up in a camp along the Santee on a damp and gray winter's day early in 1779.

Eulah Mae saw almost nothing of her father over the next two years. He had committed himself full-time to the cause and to General Marion. As the war dragged on, keeping her father away, the girl grew into a young woman routinely unseen by

those around her. Mrs. Stokes, having already lost two of her sons and being in a constant state of worry about the third one—who had not returned for the harvest, nor had he been seen or heard from since his departure—spent most of her time in prayer or waiting on the porch for his return, straining her neck to see down the long empty road. Mr. Stokes, growing more perplexed with the years and possibly no longer aware of Eulah Mae’s presence, spent much of his spare time, pail in hand, wandering the pasture near the creek, looking for Violet, the milk cow that had died the previous winter. Without Lucas and Theo to help on the farm, Mr. and Mrs. Stokes and Eulah Mae were reduced to what meager existence they could scratch from the land.

By the summer of 1780, as the British descended on Camden, they were getting used to the sight of redcoats in the area. A cloud of dust rising in the still summer air and the rolling thunder of horses hooves warned of the impending arrival of a column of soldiers, and Mrs. Stokes would shoo Eulah Mae into the woods to hide. If they were lucky, the British would see the Stokes were nothing more than a poor elderly couple not worth harming and continue on. The surprise arrival of smaller squads offered little prior warning and presented a greater threat, so Eulah Mae had to learn to move as quick as a jackrabbit at only a glance from Mrs. Stokes.

“All men’re animals,” was all Mrs. Stokes offered in explanation. “An’ soldiers’re the worst of men. An’ British the worst of soldiers. Now do as I say, Eulah Mae—hide in yonder trees and pray to the Lord for our deliverance.”

The first time the Stokes’ farm was pillaged was by Bloody Tarleton’s men just a few days before Camden fell on a blistering hot day in August. The British soldiers showed little respect for Mrs. Stokes’ few cherished possessions and fewer manners as they took whatever they could use or eat—the mule, the chickens—then burned the barn as a warning to the Stokes should they harbor any treasonous thoughts.

Eulah Mae had not witnessed the pillaging herself because, at the time, she had already the safety of *Eulahland*. Teeter Creek ran along the northwestern edge of the Stokes property as it wound its way through the countryside in search of the Wateree River. The creek was seldom completely dry. Even in the hottest part of summer, muddy brown water in the creek bed moved stagnantly slow. During the rains it could rise several feet and noisily tumble over itself in its rush to the river, but most of the year it moved along at the same lazy pace of the sun drifting across the sky. In the farthest corner of the property, the creek dipped into a hollow and emptied

into a pond. On the far side of the pond grew an old swamp willow that Lucas said was so old it was the first tree God ever planted in South Carolina. A line of rocks, conveniently spaced across the downstream end of the pond enabled any child with the least amount of agility to cross to the other side where the land rose gently.

When Lucas was alive he liked to swim in the pond, jumping in from a branch of the swamp willow on one side or the large flat rocks of the other. Eulah Mae did not swim and, even if she could, was too afraid of snakes. But she loved the pond anyway and would collect stones or lie on her back on the grassy slope that rose on the far side and gaze at the sky. No war invaded her sanctuary there, no chores, no study, no garden to hoe or floors to sweep or water buckets to haul from the well. Here she was the lady of the house and the slaves did all the work.

On the far side the air smelled sweeter from the pine that bordered the field than the still, heavy air that hung over the water. She could sit in the grass and watch the clouds float by in shapes of birds or horses or gallant patriots, like the ones she had seen thundering down the road on their way to glory. The Stokes' property ended at the creek. The other side was someone else's property, but if anyone owned that land, Eulah Mae had never seen them. The land was unplowed and the next house in that direction was the now vacant and decaying Myggs place more than two miles down.

Lucas had died and it was looking as if Theo was never to return, so Eulah Mae considered it likely that she was the only person on earth to know of the pond. She was entirely at liberty to proclaim it and the land beyond hers—she called it *Eulahland* and herself Lady of the House, Queen of the Realm, where nobody challenged her rule because only obedient servants and grateful subjects lived there. When she saw the soldiers riding down the Camden road, she imagined they were her soldiers, going off to fight her war. In *Eulahland* the soil was rich and black, the grass vibrant green, the sky a brilliant blue, and the vague gray world of the elderly Stokes was a thousand miles away. In *Eulahland*, hunger was stemmed by feasts, and not by a mere head of cabbage or a squirrel stew. Eulah Mae learned about hunger that summer the British moved into Camden. Not a vague unsatisfied emptiness of wishing they could have a Sunday dinner every day, but the kind that stabbed when the British soldiers stole what little stores of food there was when a long winter loomed ahead. Hunger taught her how to handle a musket well enough to hunt for rabbit, squirrel or wild turkey; hunger taught her cunning enough to have several

small vegetable patches hidden among the thick weeds that were reclaiming the Stokes' once prosperous lands. But there was another hunger that was beginning to trouble her.

It started during the first spring after Lucas had died. She was by her pond. A doe and its fawn had come to the pond's edge, and the setting sun tinted the sky with violet and orange. Eulah Mae looked upon the scene and something moved inside, just below her chest. A stirring inside like hunger, but not for food. She wanted to gather it all, pull it in and cradle it close to her body. Since then, it happened more often—stirring whenever she looked upon something of beauty. It made her feel good. At first.

As her body changed from that of a girl to that of a woman, the stirrings were becoming more persistent. Not exactly the same—peculiar, not altogether unpleasant, sometimes wonderful, but sometimes awful feelings were simmering inside. It was no longer sunsets, deer or clouds that caused them, but young men in uniform—even those despicable British soldiers could cause them. The stirrings that she had once loved were changing—they were different, lower down.

She asked Mrs. Stokes if maybe she was coming down with the grippe.

“It's not an illness, child,” Mrs. Stokes said sternly. “It's the curse.”

“Why am I cursed?” Eulah Mae asked her.

“The curse of womanhood,” Mrs. Stokes said grimly as she wiped her hands on the apron she tied on in the morning and would not take off until she retired to bed again.

“Another curse?” Eulah Mae did not understand why it was that being a woman had involved so many curses—what was God blaming her for? “But I have these yearnings, ma'am, these stirrings inside,” she said. “Is that part of the curse?”

The old woman turned and glared at Eulah Mae.

“Pray, child,” the old woman said, leaning forward until her hard, square face was only inches from Eulah Mae's. “Pray for strength. Only God can save you, Eulah Mae. You must pray to Him to banish all thoughts of men from your mind until the right husband can be found.” She held her disapproving but merciful stare on Eulah Mae for an eternally long moment, then turned and walked out to the porch to wait for God to deliver her last son home.

That night Eulah Mae prayed long and hard to God that he might lift the curse from her.

Early in the year the war ended—when Eulah Mae was sixteen—General Greene of the Continental Army chased the British from Camden, but not before they had a chance to pillage the Stokes farm once again. As had become the usual drill when they heard the British coming, Mrs. Stokes sent Eulah Mae into the woods.

Once she was safely at the pond, she picked stones from the stream as she hopped from rock to rock toward the cool grass of *Eulahland*. A smooth, black stone—flat and round and polished black from the ages—fit in her hand perfectly and offered her comfort to wonder how long it had existed to become so smooth. What had that stone seen in its time? She was gripping it tightly to her chest, letting its coolness pass to her own body and praying for God's mercy when the crack of a twig brought her eyes wide open. Alert to the intruder, she hurried to the other side and hid behind the bushes where she would not be seen.

It was a young soldier, a British soldier.

Eulah Mae peered from her vantage point. The British plunderer was alone. He was young, only a boy really, not much older than she, but certainly not more than eighteen. Eulah Mae felt the stirrings again and, still holding her polished black stone, pressed it harder to her chest and silently prayed to make them stop. She held her breath so as not to give her presence away, though, to her confusion, inside she was screaming out to be discovered.

The young soldier looked at the pond for several seconds, then set his rifle down and removed his haversack.

*Perhaps he just wants a drink of water and will then be on his way a-pillaging,* Eulah Mae thought.

Then the young soldier removed his coat.

*Perhaps he is going to wash his face.*

By the time the young soldier had removed his boots and was unbuttoning his trousers, Eulah Mae realized with a horrible fascination that he was intending to disrobe and enter the pond to bathe. She knew it was her lady-like duty to clear her throat and make her presence known, so that he would be able to do the gentlemanly thing and cover himself up, but he was the enemy and there was no telling what he

might do to her—what horrid, unthinkable crime he may commit should he discover her.

*Unmentionable*, Mrs. Stokes had called his potential crimes. *Unmentionable*. Eulah Mae wished Mrs. Stokes had mentioned them, so she would have an idea of what she was talking about. She remained in her position behind the bushes, silent, knowing it would be proper for her to avert her eyes, but she could not let him out of her sight.

The young soldier undressed completely, to his bare skin. Eulah Mae stifled a gasp at the sight of him. It was true that she had witnessed her brother Lucas in a similar state of undress on occasion when they were both younger, but never had it caused such a stampede of stirrings.

The soldier jumped into the water and swam across the pond to the side where Eulah Mae was hiding. She crouched further out of view until he turned and swam back toward the other side. She stretched her neck above the bush and watched him swim. He was thin, his skin pale, but the smooth white flesh skimming the surface of the water mesmerized her.

She moved from the bushes to another position behind the swamp willow. It was riskier for her to watch from there, but she could no longer control the stirrings inside her; she could only obey them. She watched his soft white backside as he swam to the middle of the pond and then, without warning, he rolled over onto his back. Eulah Mae gasped and this time it did not go unnoticed by the soldier, who stopped swimming and looked around anxiously at the bushes until his eyes met Eulah Mae's peering out from behind the tree.

His face went a deep shade of red, which made Eulah Mae want to reach out to the boy and pull him to her bosom. She moved from behind the tree, her eyes locked with his. He tread water, but did not speak.

The redness subsided from his face. Instead of doing the proper thing and returning to the far side of the lake to dress himself, he swam closer to her until he was able to stand on the bottom again, then, hesitantly, he took a few steps closer to the grassy bank where she stood.

Eulah Mae's heart beat so hard as he stepped from the water, she thought certainly he could see it pounding beneath her breast. She could not breathe and feared she might faint as he took her hand and pulled her closer. She did not resist.

He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek, lightly at first, then looked into her eyes. She offered no argument. When he kissed her again, it was passionately on the mouth and the polished stone slid from her fingers into the deep grass. At long last, God answered her prayers.

The British surrendered in October 1781. Hezekiah stayed with General Marion as long as he could to be ready for any skirmishes that might still flare up, with more Englishmen needing to be shot. But when they dismissed him, he had no choice but to return to Teeter Mill, face the hard soil waiting to be plowed and the long winter ahead.

Hezekiah guided the wagon away from the Stokes' farm on a blustery autumn afternoon, with Eulah Mae twisting in her seat to look behind. She had dreamed of the day her father would come home and take her away, but he seemed more of a stranger now, taking her from a lonely place she had come to call home to another lonely place she had all but forgotten.

She gazed beyond the field to the trees where the creek was, where the pond was, where *Eulahland* was. A secret smile of sadness tugged at her mouth when she thought of the young British soldier—she never saw him again after their first meeting. Then she let out a soft sigh—if he ever returned, he would not know where to find her now.

She turned her attention to the weatherworn old house growing smaller behind her. Mrs. Stokes, who had seen them off from the porch, was looking in the other direction, down the long, empty dirt road. Mr. Stokes wandered across the yard, pail in hand, heading toward the unplowed field looking for his dead cow. Eulah Mae turned back in her seat, folded her hands in her lap and stared at the dust-covered toes of her bare feet.